DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 171 856 UD 019 511

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TITLE Declining Enrollment: Community Options and Actions.
INSTITUTION Santa Barbara County Schools, Calif.
PUB DATE 1 Mar 78
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Change Strategies; Community Involvement; Cost Effectiveness; *Declining Enrollment; Elementary Secondary Education; Flexible Facilities; Parent Participation; *School Closing; *School Community Relationship; *School Organization; *School Planning; Year Round Schools

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that school systems can develop and implement a plan to keep schools operating to the advantage of students, staff, and community despite declining enrollment. In arguing against the closing of schools, this paper provides quotes from a survey and summary statements from school officials to show that closings do not save school districts money and that school closings have a negative impact on surrounding neighborhoods. Brief summaries of case studies that illustrate diverse ways in which various school districts have coped with this problem are also provided. Some of the strategies discussed in these summarizations include a "grandparent in the classroom" program, year-round education, parental involvement, community and/or adult education, and the use of school buildings for non-school activities. (EB)

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DECLINING ENROLLMENT

COMMUNITY OPTIONS AND ACTIONS

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Community Options and Actions

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March 1, 1978

"When schools exist apart from the community, they stand as monuments to the School Board and their ability to get bond issues passed. When schools exist apart from the community, they stand as reminders to citizens of the unpleasant past of their own educational experiences. When schools exist apart from the community, they stand as symbols of something to vote against in the future. When schools exist apart from the community—they stand. They stand empty, unused, and economically unfeasible, they create a further segmented and fragmented society.

"On the other side of the coin is the school which is a part of the community. These facilities are an integral part of the total resources of the community. These facilities can be utilized in helping a community move towards becoming a self-actualizing community."[1]

Enrollment is declining, classrooms are empty, revenue is dwindling, costs are escalating, what is next? Close the school? No, you do not necessarily have to close the school for any or all of the above reasons. By mixing common sense with imagination, school systems of varying size and description can develop and implement a plan to keep schools operating to the advantage of the students, staff and community.

The University of Washington recently completed a study entitled "The Environmental Impact of School Closures."[2] Here are some pertinent quotes from the study. "In effect, then, 33.3% of the school districts who had calculated actual cost savings after the closure of elementary schools concluded that they had saved money. On the other hand, 50% of those districts who had calculated actual costs concluded that no money had been saved by the closure of schools. The lack of cost savings were attributed to increased transportation costs, reduced school support, increased crime rate, decreased property values, and disruption of educational programs.

"As noted above, the remaining 16.7% of the schools indicated that the closure had cost the district money. Thus, 66.7% of the school districts which had evaluated the effects of closures came to the conclusion that they had saved no money or that the closures were costing the district more money. Correspondingly, 33.3% concluded that they had saved money from the closures but it was less

than had been projected before the schools were closed.

"Data relating to the impact on neighborhoods where schools had been closed were sought as part of the survey effort. It was determined that of those districts surveyed, only four districts had conducted formal Ex Post Facto evaluations of the impact of closing elementary schools. Those districts are: Arlington, Virginia; Los Angeles, California; Wichita, Kansas; Charlotte, North Carolina.

"Summary statements by school officials concerning the impact of school closures on surrounding neighborhoods are presented . . .

> Arlington, Virginia: Young families have done more selective house-buying since the closures. Such activities have caused a 10 to 20 percent drop on property values in those areas. Because of this, we are very reluctant to close our schools.
>
> Los Angeles, California: Closure had a negative impact upon these areas. We now have a policy that closure is the last resort after everything else has been tried.
>
> Wichita, Kansas: Enrollment continued to decline in the areas where schools were closed. Three downtown schools were consolidated into one. Enrollment before consolidation was 450; in three years it has declined to 225.
>
> Charlotte, North Carolina: Crime rate has increased in areas where schools were closed, people moved out, neighborhoods degenerated. Beginning to build two new schools in those areas.

"Twenty districts had conducted formal evaluations regarding the impact of closure decisions. For the most part, these districts concluded that:

A. Neighborhoods quickly diminished in viability after the elementary schools were closed; some neighborhoods, depending on the area, were completely destroyed.

B. Support of public education diminished in the district as a result of the closure decision.

C. Extreme care must be taken in order to avoid turning a school district toward racial isolation of its pupils.

"The closure of elementary schools is an exceedingly complex issue, having extensive and persuasive ramifications in virtually all aspects of urban life. Once an elementary school is closed, the environmental forces of out-migration, population decline and neighborhood deterioration are sent in motion. It is difficult—if not impossible—to reverse these forces.

"Closure is a simple solution to the problem of excess space. But at the same time is more assuredly a source of other problems; problems far more intricate and complex and much more difficult and costly to solve.

"Those districts faced with the problem of declining enrollment may do well to heed the experiences of the districts cited in this study. By doing so, the temptations of adopting short-range measures might be rejected, and more creative and less costly solutions to the problems of declining enrollment might be explored."

CASE STUDIES

To assist school personnel and community members develop creative programs that deal with declining enrollments we have identified and are summarizing case studies that illustrate diverse ways of coping with the problem. These summaries are brief and intended to spark your ideas as well as provide resources for committees. Each case is referenced and identified in the appendix along with other information of related interest.

Florence Community Schools
San Diego, California[3]

"Florence Community School was experiencing a declining enrollment. There were rumors of possible closing the school in the near future. An alert principal and an interested community decided to try and change the course of history. They petitioned the Board of Education, and, in November of '74 became a community school. In November of '74, Florence had 347 children, the buildings were empty for the most part. There were some community groups using the facilities on occasion. Of the 38,000 adults and seniors living in the Florence District, only a handful knew of the school's existence. Most area seniors felt no ties to the school except as a tax burden on their overworked budget.

"Empty classrooms using up taxes? No! A senior center serving area people in a way which provides untold benefits to children and seniors alike. A different way of looking at unused school buildings perhaps, but one that makes sense in an economy that's crying from excessive taxation.

"Senior Center! A new building on Campus! No! An existing classroom converted to a Senior's Center. Not due to declining enrollment however, Florence is now holding her own. In the spring of '76, Florence received a 'one time only' grant from the Area Agency on Aging to help establish a multi-purpose senior center. The grant was to relocate a portable unit from another school where it was no longer needed, build a ramp, and carpet the unit. The district donated the unit. In addition to the Area Agency on Aging and San Diego Unified providing the building, land, lights, heat, cleaning, ramp, and carpet; the San Diego Regional Employment and Training Consortium's P.R.O.V.E.N. program provided a half-time coordinator at no cost for 13 weeks; Quota Club of San Diego gave $300; San Diego County Employees Association gave $1,000; American Red Cross donated furniture, and local people donated furniture, artifacts, and time. San Diego Community College, Adult Division, Center City Office is providing many programs at no cost.

"As a result of senior involvement, and a need on the part of children, the Florence staff is initiating a full-scale senior 'grandparent in the classroom' program complete with inservice training, and, a retired district counsellor coordinating it. What started out to be a dubious use of an empty classroom is paying off in dividends beyond expectations.

"In the early days of planning a subcommittee of the Florence Advisory Council was formed. Local people were invited to serve on the committee. The Florence Senior Center committee became a decision-making body; administration acts in an advisory capacity. Committee members not only make all decisions concerning the operation of the center, but are active participants and are currently doubling as staff members.

"It is often said, that, the two groups in our society no one pays attention to are seniors and children. At Florence they pay attention to each other. It is common to see seniors walking about the campus interacting with children. Children in the school make decorations for the senior lunch tables. An increasing number of seniors are volunteering time in classrooms."

Peralta School
Oakland, California[4]

"Five years ago it made good sense for Oakland's Board of Education to consider closing Peralta School. Enrollment was dropping. The building was cramped and deteriorating. Its student body had become almost 80% black, while white parents in the well-integrated neighborhood increasingly sent their children to other public and private schools. Staff turnover, absenteeism, and vandalism were high, and there was another elementary school just four blocks away.

"Today, Peralta is a thriving facility with an ethnically balanced student body, a dedicated staff and plans for a new building to be completed in 1977.

"In 1972 a parent who worked as a parts technician for a trucking firm, decided that it was important to keep his neighborhood school open. 'I knew we were to lose this school unless we found some way to make the school's program exciting' said the parent. 'If kids were learning, if teachers and parents were happy, we would have quality, integrated education and our worries about declining enrollment and having to close the school would be over.'

"The search lead the parent to accept the chairmanship of Peralta's newly formed Master Plan Citizens Committee, a branch of a city-wide community group formed to advise and support Oakland's schools.

"Eventually, they focused on year-round education as one way to improve the quality of education. Then came the first big disappointment. In a poll of the community, two-thirds of Peralta's parents rejected the proposed change. The '45-15 plan' they voted down called the 45-day school periods alternating with 15-day inter-sessions during the entire year.

"The committee (then) sent out mailings about year-round education, held meetings, telephoned parents, spoke at neighborhood kaffee clatches, and finally visited every home in the school's district to answer questions. Their persistence paid off. On a second vote in June of 1972, 80% of Peralta's families voted in favor of year-round education, and only 19% opposed it. An impressive 96% of those eligible voted.

"With the community behind them, the committee took on a tougher job of getting support from the Board of Education. After a year of preparation, they made a successful presentation to the Board which gave them approval to begin year-round education at Peralta in September, 1972.

"Peralta's calendar change was only the beginning of its real transformation. All teachers were given the option of learning to individualize in multi-age classes, or of requesting transfers to other district schools. One teacher left; the others received special training during the summer and are now offering individualized instruction to all their students.

"Peralta's students are divided into four groups. Three of these groups are in school at all times. The fourth has the option of taking a vacation or attending remedial and enrichment activities. Those who come to the inter-sessions are offered programs in dance, drama, art, sewing, and nature study as well as field trips, resource speakers, and tutoring in subjects in which they need help.

"Inter-sessions are particularly attractive to Peralta's working parents who can choose to send their children to school 234 days a year.

"Other changes evolved from the re-structuring. Peralta students do not receive standard report cards. Instead, conference days are scheduled from 3:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. when working parents can attend. Attendance is near perfect.

"Parents are involved in other aspects of the school, too. They help in dozens of ways. Now they are working with an architect to design our new buildings to fit the special needs of the school and this community.

"A recent survey of staff and parents reflects the satisfaction of both groups with the result of this new spirit. While year-round education allows the school to accommodate more students, Peralta's individualized teaching requires paid classroom aides, but there is a less obvious saving. Vandalism has dropped because the school is occupied most of the time. Wear and tear now comes largely from use, not abuse.

"The most impressive savings aren't (necessarily) measured in dollars and cents. Children who were failing elsewhere are succeeding here. Children from all over Oakland are applying to enter Peralta. The school now has a waiting list."

Champlain School District
Champlain, New York[5]

"Our geographical location makes our district unique. We are bordered on the north by Canada and on the east by Vermont. The province of Quebec, to encourage their students (over the age of 14) to remain in school, pays the family a

stipend for those students remaining in school. The families may use the stipend to pay for the tuition of their child to the host school. We, also, have some students from Vermont who, if given the opportunity, would attend our high school, since it is the nearest high school to their homes.

"Several positive alternatives in meeting the possible enrollment decline in our future are the following:

(1) Open our enrollment to non-residents and require payment of tuition by them, to compensate the additional expenses incurred without state aid being generated; and

(2) the formation of a community education program.

"In the community education program, the program exists for adults to attend classes on a part-time basis to encourage them to meet and complete requirements for a high school diploma. We have one adult presently attending on an experimental basis. Although we do not currently have available space or staff to accommodate these people, it does open up an alternative option for the future."

Wissahickon School (9-12)
Ambler, Pennsylvania[6]

"Two years ago the enrollment was almost 1,700 students. Today enrollment stands at 1,580 and is still declining. Pennsylvania Economy League estimates predict, that the enrollment may fall to about 1,200 within ten years. In spite of the obvious problems that accompany declining enrollment in schools, we have been actively planning our programs from a positive perspective.

"The situation, however, has provided opportunities. In the past we found ourselves in constant turmoil to expand curricular offerings, facilities, and programs. With that pressure relieved, we now have an excellent opportunity to concentrate on improving instruction and solidifying the curriculum.

"The increased use of community resources and increased listening skills applied to community concern has helped to create a much more positive school-community relationship. As a result, while cognizant of the problems of declining enrollment, we feel some very positive concepts can be achieved through proper planning and emphasis."

Kit Carson School District R1
Flager, Colorado[7]

"A careful analysis of pupil enrollment projections was made. It was obvious that the enrollment would continue to decline. Several alternative plans for the combination of classes at the secondary level were studied. A proposal was submitted to a neighboring school district with similar problems, suggesting cooperation that would result in the more efficient and effective utilization of teachers and facilities. The following changes were made for the 1976-77 school year.

The first and second grade classes and the third and fourth grade classes were grouped into two class groups.

Students from the neighboring school would participate in vocational programs offered at Flager but not at their school.

Flager students would participate in advanced science and mathematics programs at the neighboring school.

Special Education programs would be rescheduled so that a teacher could be shared and students in self-contained classrooms from neighboring school districts would be brought to Flager.

"Dialog on full cooperation with a neighboring school district is continuing with a goal of establishing a secondary school in one community, and elementary center in the other community.

"The results are that budget savings were realized, programs have been maintained, and prospects for additional savings are favorable for the future."

The Nichols School (Private)
Buffalo, New York[8]

"The enrollment of Nichols School has increased steadily over the five years. Our student body has expanded from 649 in the 1973-74 school year to 723 in the current 1976-77 school year. Yet despite these encouraging statistics, our trustees and administration are aware of several factors which will threaten the stability of future enrollment. As a result, Nichols began an active student recruitment program in 1974 and continues today.

"Our future enrollments are threatened by three main factors: declining birthrates, escalating tuition costs, and poor local economy. Birthrate projections for Nichols' home base, Buffalo and Erie County, indicate that the number of children in the 10-14 year old age group (Nichols' prime applicant pool) will decrease by 34 percent by 1985.

"In addition, the economic blight, which has settled over Western New York for three years now, shows every sign of continuing. Big manufacturing concerns, like Western Electric and Westinghouse are shutting down divisions in Buffalo and moving to sunbelt states. The status of the economy drives away the young, and the educated, many of whom would be Nichols' parents in the future.

"Finally, Nichols' future enrollment is threatened by an escalating tuition rate which is annually pricing a Nichols education beyond the reach of more and more families.

"What are our plans to counter this negative outlook? Primarily we will continue to expand upon our present student recruitment program. The main thrust of this program will be to devise ways of mobilizing our parents and alumni to help us familiarize potential Nichols families. They are an invaluable recruitment source."

"There is also what has become almost a classic story of making a building so indispensible that the school board could not consider its closing. The principal of Fairlington Elementary School in Arlington, Virginia saw her enrollment drop from 440 to 225. She first turned space over to a play school, then invited the recreation department to use the school for some of its programs and then reserved space for use by a senior citizens group. A community theatre and several other local organizations soon joined in using the school's facilities. Before long, talk of closing the school ceased, and some began to wonder if perhaps it needed an addition.

"An 800-student junior high school in Arlington, Virginia uses about half its capacity in a district-wide alternative program. The rest of the building is used by a Montessori school (run by the district but with a tuition charge to parents) and adult education courses. A community center has now been added to the site, connected to the school so as to make use of its gymnasium, food service areas and auditorium. In building the center, the recreation department provided a playground and tennis courts, available for use by the school.

"Other schools in Arlington house museums, day care centers, drama workshops, recreational programs, alternative educational programs, lunch programs for senior citizens, branches of the public library and youth programs. The major disadvantage is that the district could spend little to remodel the facilities, so the user groups have to make do with what exists.

"The Baltimore County (Maryland) Public Schools had been experiencing declines for at least three years before some kind of plan was sought for using surplus space. A meeting of administrators, supervisors and principals early in 1976 was admittedly the first attempt to address the problem, and the atmosphere was already one of fear of staff cutbacks. A number of suggestions emerged for filling available space with educational activities, especially those that require the services of school staff: programs for senior citizens, who could also be recruited as volunteers to work with students in child development courses; provisions for allowing adults to audit regular school courses; minicourses for adults during the school day, to be based on the selection by the participants of offerings by district teachers in home economics, instrumental music, art, dance, writing, reading, discussion groups, foreign language and the like; alcohol and drug abuse programs, using the school counseling services; film and lecture series for all ages, including the students; and small group instruction, student tutors, aides and flexible classes."[9]

The community can provide special resources and ideas to help the school with its problems. The school, when, well integrated into the community, can provide its resources to help the community with its problems. Organize your school-community task force and begin work now.

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